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DAN SMOOT

SOME COMPUTERIZED ELECTIONS

"Dr. W. J. 'Bill' Norman, a Democrat who ran eighth in a seven-man race for the State House of Representatives, was reported to have filed a protest with county officials."

That intriguing sentence is from a story in the November 8, 1968, issue of *The Missoulian* (Missoula, Montana), reporting on punch card voting in the Missoula County general elections this year. It is quite a story.

Montana State law requires the rotation of candidates' name-positions on ballots: a candidate who is listed first on ballots at some precincts is listed in another position at other precincts.

It is a good law; and it worked well when people were hand-marking their ballots, or voting on big machines that count votes as they are cast. But the results were wild this year when Missoula County used computers and punch cards.

In some precincts, a voter had to punch hole Number 6 to vote for Humphrey, hole Number 11 to vote for Nixon. In other precincts, the order was reversed: hole Number 6 went to Nixon, hole Number 11 to Humphrey. The computer programmer (or somebody) failed to tell the computer about the State rotation law, and give it proper instructions for rotating the holes.

The results were extraordinary in at least 20 of Missoula County's 47 precincts. Traditional Republican strongholds which voted overwhelmingly for all other Republican candidates, overwhelmingly defeated the Republican presidential candidate — and vice versa. In Precinct 42, both punch card machines and hand ballots were used. The Precinct is strongly Republican. The punch card machines gave 76% of their votes to Humphrey. The hand ballots in the same precinct were 65% for Nixon.[1]

There is no human way for anyone ever to tell how the *people* of Missoula County voted in November, 1968. The punch card system decided the elections.

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"DeKalb County [Illinois] may never be able to determine the total voting tabulations in the Tuesday general elections many observers believe."

That is the mournful lead paragraph of an article in the November 6, 1968, issue of *Sun Tribune*, Sycamore, Illinois.

DeKalb County tried out punch card voting machines for the first time in the election this year. It was a melancholy error, because, as the paper said, no one will ever know how the elections would have gone if the votes of the people had been correctly recorded and counted.

In addition to the usual trouble with punch card voting (cards accidentally "overvoted" or mutilated by voters; cards that were defective to begin with; punch card machines not properly assembled, and so on), there was something unique in DeKalb County, Illinois, in the 1968 general elections: one punch card machine inadvertently gave votes intended for Hubert Humphrey to the Socialist Labor Party candidate for President, and vice versa.[2]

Punch card voting machines were used in several Oregon counties for the May, 1968, primaries. In all places, there were difficulties: mispunched cards (because of defective equipment or unskilled voters) caused computer jams, and obliged election officials and political party workers to examine rejected cards and guess how voters intended to vote.

The worst mess was in Klamath County, where precincts shared polling places. Punch card ballots prepared for one precinct listed candidates in sequence different from their listing on ballots for other precincts. The ballot cards were scrambled, however; and voters could not tell ballot cards prepared for one precinct from those prepared for another. Every voter using a card not prepared for his own precinct miscast his vote — without knowing it.

Votes in approximately 25 of Klamath County's 92 precincts were affected. County officials and representatives of the punch card voting machine company assured the public that they could examine the punched cards, unscramble the chaos, and tell how the voters really wanted to vote; but it was false assurance. There was no possible way to determine the intent of voters who, because of a defective system, had voted for candidates other than those of their choice.[3]

Punch card voting machines were used in the two largest Georgia counties (Fulton and DeKalb) for the September, 1966, primaries. The most spectacular trouble occurred in Fulton County (Atlanta), where Cecil Turner won Democrat nomination for the legislature over Jule Felton, Jr. by 54 votes — out of 98,590 votes counted. Felton demanded a recount. Election officials and representatives of the two candidates spent nearly a week trying to count the punch card ballots.

They discovered that the computer had not counted 3600 votes. There were 2500 votes invalidated by "overvoting"—voters mistakenly punching their cards in such a way as to vote for both candidates. There were about 1100 "defective" ballots, described by election officials as "not computer perfect" — which could mean that the cards had been bent, chewed, or moistened by voters; that they were improperly inked or perforated by the printer; that they had absorbed too much moisture from the atmosphere; that they had been improperly punched because the voter inadvertently held the stylus at the wrong angle, or had used something besides the stylus for punching.[4]

At least one voter in the 1966 Georgia primaries lost his vote because he left his punch card ballot in the voting machine, where it was punctured again in different places by the voter who followed. Some voters spoiled their own ballots by punching them without even putting them in a machine. Others inserted the ballot cards upside down into the machines.[5]

Election officials guessed at the intent of some of the voters whose ballots were "not computer perfect," and at the intent of some whose ballots had been overvoted or otherwise spoiled. But there were some 3500 cards that could not be counted at all, even on the recount. That many voters lost their votes in that one congressional district in that one election.[6]

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After a week of indecisive effort to count mispunched punch card ballots, Turner and Felton settled their election in court. A judge somehow decided that 127,000 votes could be counted and that Turner had won — by 99 votes rather than by 54.[4,6]

The punch card disaster in the September, 1966, Georgia primaries was merely a warm up for worse to come. The punch card contraptions were used in Fulton, DeKalb, and a couple of other Georgia counties for the November, 1966, general elections.

In that election, Georgia failed to elect a governor — but did not know it until almost a week later. It was four days after the election before Fulton County ballots were finally tallied. At that point, it looked as if Howard Callaway (Republican) had won with a slim majority over Lester Maddox (Democrat);[7] but later, it was discovered that a 6% write-in vote for Ellis Arnall was enough to keep either Callaway or Maddox from getting a majority (as required by state law); and the gubernatorial race was decided by the State legislature.

Another close race in the Georgia 1966 general elections was between U. S. Representative James A. Mackay and Benjamin B. Blackburn. Blackburn defeated the incumbent by about 400 votes. In that race, approximately 2000 punch card ballots could not be counted, because of "overvoting" or defective cards.[8]

There is a possibility that the *computer* itself cast enough votes to throw the close race to Mr. Blackburn. Note the following from an editorial in the November 16, 1966, issue of *The Decatur-DeKalb News*:

"When cards jam in the computer, it is possible, and did occur last week, for the computer to crumple cards and pop out the punch holes for candidates and issues. In effect, the computer may have cast a few votes itself, since the mutilated cards were repunched with workers of both parties doing their best to determine the intent of the voter."

A Subcommittee on Elections of the U. S. House of Representatives investigated the Mackay-Blackburn election. In a letter dated May 25, 1967, U. S. Representative Robert T. Ashmore, chairman of the subcommittee, commented on the efficacy of the punch card voting system in DeKalb County. From Ashmore's letter:

"It appears that an undetermined number of votes for Representative in Congress were not counted for the following reasons:

"1. The voter voted a straight party ticket and crossed over to vote for the opposing party's individual candidate for Congress resulting in an 'overvote,' invalid under Georgia law. The voting devices permitted a voter to miscast his ballot in this manner.

"2. The voter did not properly record his vote for Representative because he failed to fully punch out of the ballot card the scored block bearing the number of the candidate of his choice, resulting in the recording of a 'no-vote' by the electronic computer which processed his ballot.

"It also appears that an appreciable number of punch card ballots were bent, torn or mutilated, rendering them incapable of tabulation by the computer and making it necessary for election officials to duplicate them for computer processing . . . .

"If the integrity of balloting in future Federal elections is jeopardized by use of voting equipment with inherent capacity for error, the result may be Congressional exercise of its legislative power to regulate the type of equipment used in such elections."

In 1967, the Massachusetts legislature enacted legislation allowing communities in the Commonwealth to use punch card voting machines. Newton (a suburb of Boston) was the first to try the punch cards — in the November, 1967, general elections.

The new system was expected to accelerate the counting of ballots — to eliminate the all-night counting sessions of yesteryear. City officials predicted that, with the punch card system, the total

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vote of Newton (about 22,000) would be tallied by midnight following the closing of the polls. Representatives of the punch card voting machine company said the tally would be completed by 11:00 p.m. But the punch card system was far more impressive in gathering up votes than in yielding results.

The computer chewed up and rejected ballot cards all night. The tally was declared complete at 4:00 o'clock the next morning; but five days later, no one was sure whether any votes had really been counted properly; and the mayor of Newton ordered a "re-tally" of all votes.

The blame was put on voters — the kind who bend, fold, mutilate, spindle, or bite punch cards (or write on them or perspire on them), making them unpalatable to computers.[9]

Several Massachusetts communities used punch card voting machines for the presidential preference primary election on April 30, 1968. All had difficulty, but the worst trouble was in Arlington. Only 9070 voted on punch card machines in Arlington; but it took four days to count the ballots. Much of the time was consumed by election officials examining mispunched cards, guessing how the voters intended to vote. Hand counting supplemented computer counting; and, in the end, no one really knew how the elections went.

On May 10, 1968, the Massachusetts Secretary of State called a meeting of election officials from six Greater Boston communities to discuss the punch card problem.

Arlington officials said one reason for the fiasco in their town was that computerized elections require a complicated technological expertise that election officials do not have. This point led to speculation that computerized voting may take the supervision of elections out of the hands of city and county officials, and give control to a "technocratic elite" — the only people who know how to process and read the results.[10]

Why, in the face of all this, do election officials insist on using punch card voting systems? That mystery will be explored, if not solved, in this *Report* next week.

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FOOTNOTES

(1) *The Missoulian*, Nov. 8, 1968
(2) *The DeKalb Daily Chronicle*, November 8, 1968
(3) (Salem) *Oregon Statesman*, May 29 & 30, 1968; *The* (Portland) *Oregonian*, May 29 & 30, 1968
(4) *The Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 28 & Nov. 11, 1966
(5) Editorial, *The Atlanta Constitution*, Oct. 31, 1966
(6) *The Atlanta Journal And Constitution*, Oct. 30, 1966
(7) *The Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 19, 1966
(8) *The Atlanta Constitution*, Nov. 16 & 24, 1966
(9) *The Boston Herald*, Nov. 9, 1967; (Providence, Rhode Island) *Evening Bulletin*, Nov. 8, 1967; *The Boston Herald-Traveler*, Nov. 12, 1967
(10) *The Boston Herald-Traveler*, May 2 & 10, 1968; *The Boston Record American*, May 4, 1968; *The Boston Globe*, May 3, 1968

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